

SOSHIRO MATSUBARA AT CROY
NIELSEN, VIENNA

Heads-Off

by Max L. Feldman



Japanese-born, Vienna-based artist, Soshiro Matsubara is digging deep into the sordid past and affairs of Viennese love, loss, and revenge, at a recent show in the City of Music where heads were taken off, and Freud was keeping close watch.

The story goes like this: from 1912–14, Oskar Kokoschka had a love affair with Alma Mahler, recent widow of Gustav Mahler. Kokoschka was possessive; Alma, afraid of an all-consuming passion. He immortalised their battered fragile relationship in the painting *The Bride of the Wind* (1914). When Kokoschka went to fight in World War I, Alma distanced herself from him and took off with Walter Gropius. They married a year later.

Kokoschka didn't take rejection well. Four years later, he commissioned a life-sized doll of Alma. The simulation was intended to return his love but, dissatisfied, he destroyed it during a party, breaking a bottle of red wine over its head and decapitating it. This is the prelude for Soshiro Matsubara's ("1980) "True Romance" (all works 2020). The exhibition includes six paintings, a pencil and gesso drawing, and a cardboard scale reproduction of the gallery space. Matsubara's take on the story is clearest in sculptures whose materials (glazed ceramics, flowing pastel-coloured fabrics, shiny metallic coatings) not only hint at the luxury of fin-de-siècle bourgeois Viennese life, but reimagine Kokoschka's lurid, jealous visions.

The centrepiece, *A Tale of Romance*, recreates the aforementioned doll. Splayed out on a carpet on the floor of the main gallery space, a naked female body – made from fleecy-looking fabric – clutches a severed male between her legs. The rest of the male body is nowhere to be seen. Both heads are made from glazed ceramics and artificial hair. Is the male crown meant to be performing oral sex? Or, is he just a masturbatory tool? There is no clear answer.

HER GREEN EYES STARE DOWN AT HER BEHEADED
LOVER, LIPS PARTED IN A PALE APPROXIMATION OF
ECSTASY.

But she looks exhausted, mournful, doomed never to receive her fill of pleasure as his tongue laps flaccidly at her vagina, his own eyes lifeless, not even present.

Throughout "True Romance", Matsubara manages to keep Kokoschka's rage close enough that we can empathise with his despair at being rejected – it happens to all of us – but with sufficient distance to see it as the behaviour of a potential sadist, too easily explained away as the symptom of an otherwise unstable "artistic temperament". And by neutralising Kokoschka's fantasy through this staging, Matsubara actually makes the viewer a part of the jilted lover's prurience, shrouded in a lost possibility of pleasure and acts of mutilation.



In *Portrait of Alma Mahler*, the doll's severed head stands on a plinth, held up by a wooden stick penetrating the base of its neck like that of a traitor placed on the city walls as a warning to others. Beneath the head, extending to the floor below, are trails of an elegant pink curtain. The violence of Kokoschka's destructive desires is writ large, reminding us of the words of serial killer Ed Gein, who thought two things when he saw a pretty girl walking down the street: that he'd like to take her out, be nice and sweet, treat her well; and, what her head would look like on a stick.

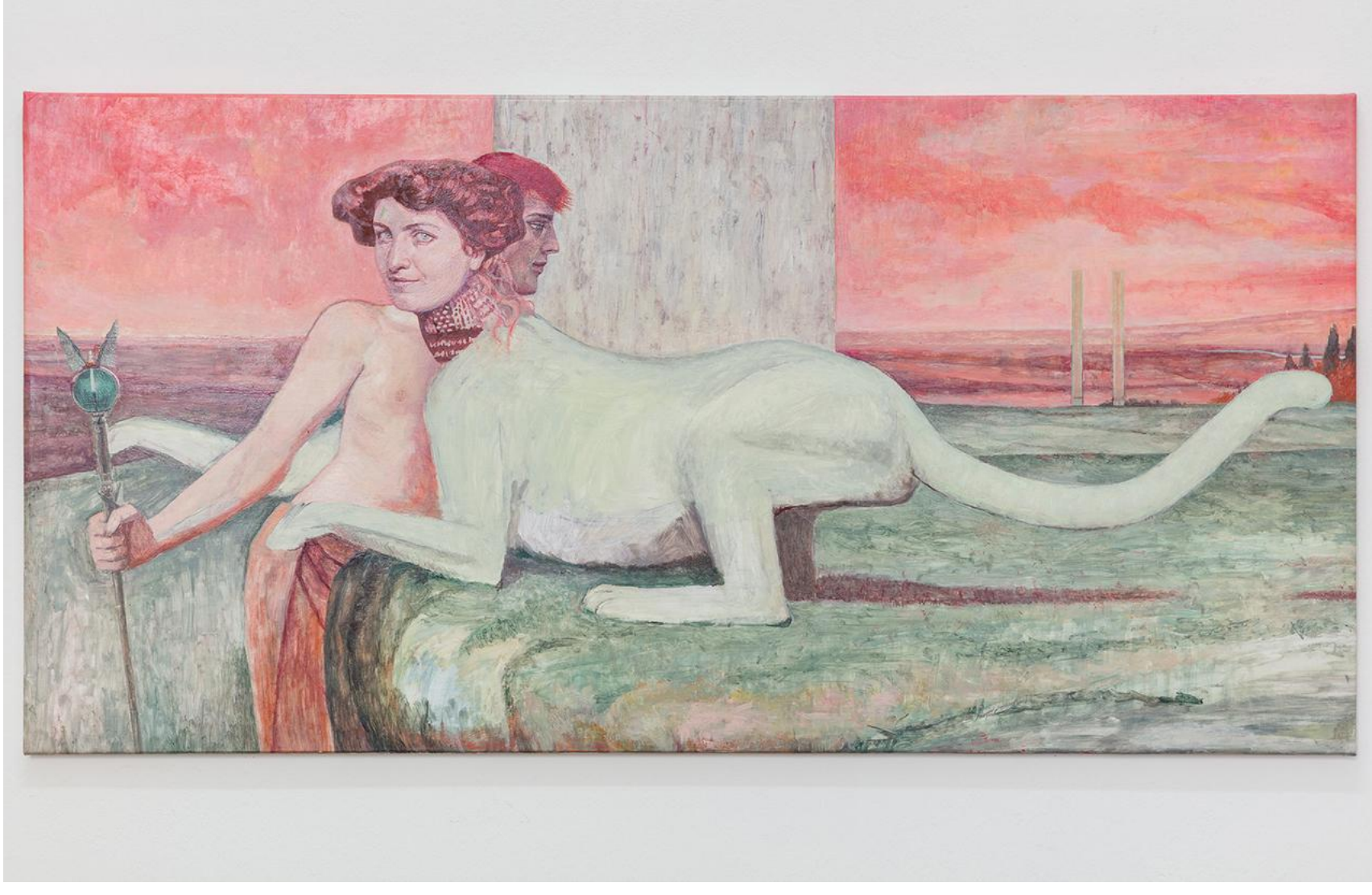
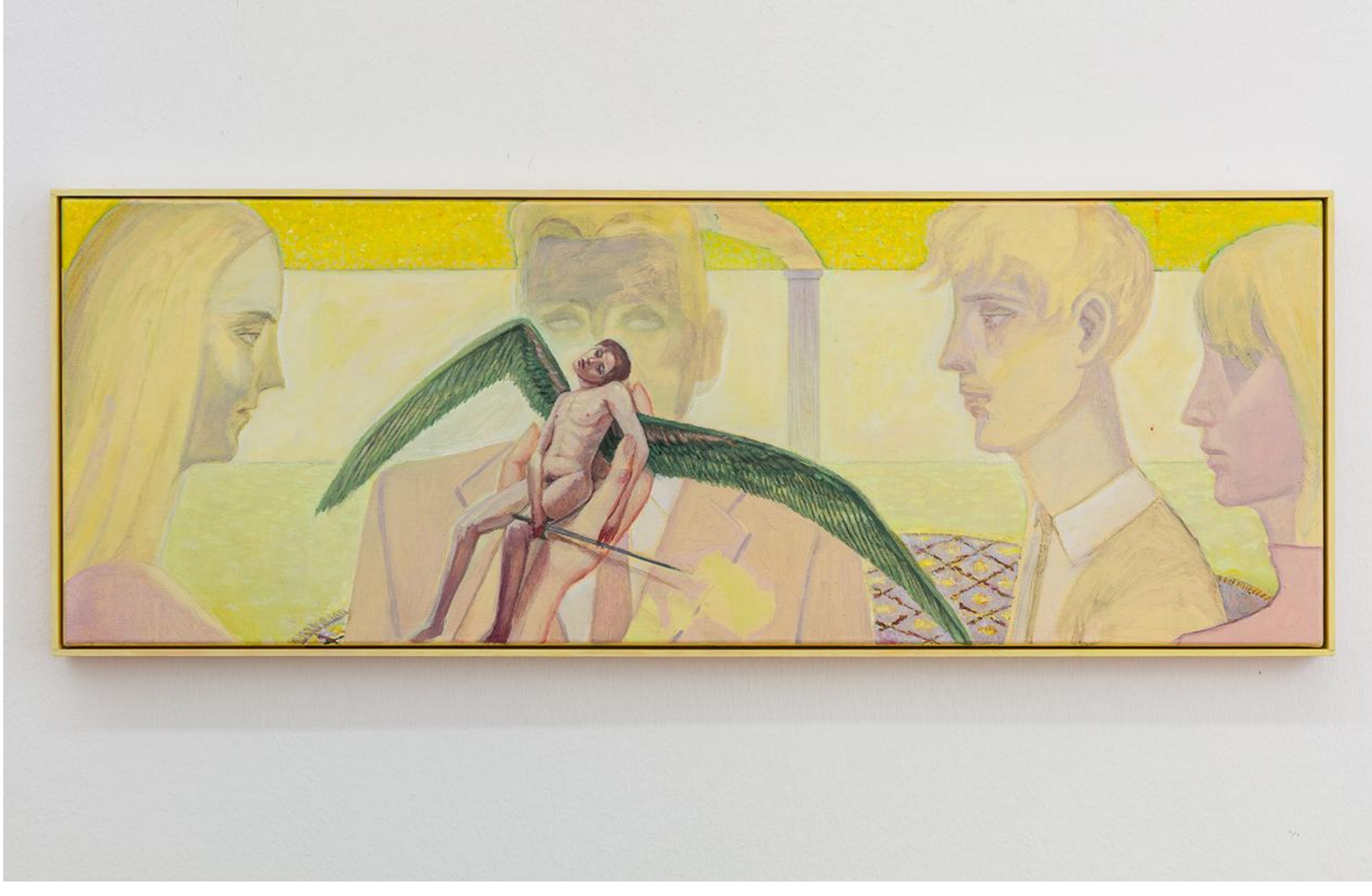
In *Memories* and *A Finger*, glazed ceramic fingers dangle from chains alongside pieces of found jewellery. The latter is almost like a lover's gift, the kind that feels like an insulting reminder of loss once an affair is over. The former uses a found floor lamp, the severed fingers dangling like trophies of war, but reminds us of dimly lit, stuffy Viennese interiors: the likely setting of Alma's encounters.



This mood appears again in *Last Night*, a four-part series of glazed ceramic lamps, shaped like reliefs of Alma's head, attached to the walls. Parts II and III are in the main room, illuminating the primal scene of sedition. IV stands in the anteroom illuminating *Sphinx I*, a wooden coat hanger with a scarf-like fabric, as if it had just been placed there before one of her erotic adventures. Part I is in the corridor, opposite the title-piece: a framed acrylic with the exhibition title written in capitals in an elegant typeface.

History hasn't been kind to Alma Mahler. Her achievements as a composer, editor, and writer have been overshadowed by those of her lovers and husbands. Matsubara doesn't do her justice either. He lets her have her own sexuality, but it's still mostly passive. She remains a lifeless thing – an uncanny puppet, a grotesque *memento mori*, a luxurious ornament. These are the very conditions that led so many bourgeois Viennese women to seek treatment with Sigmund Freud. That irony, which Matsubara doesn't account for, haunts this exhibition.

In 1910 (pre-Kokoschka, post-Gropius), the Mahler marriage was in crisis, and Gustav sought psychoanalytic treatment. Freud concluded that each desired an irreplaceable incestuous love with their own parents: Alma loved her father (hence the Alma-Gustav age difference); Gustav loved his troubled, neurotic mother, and sought this in Alma. Gustav died the following year. Freud sent the bill to Alma.



Soshiro Matsubara, "True Romance", Croy Nielsen, Vienna, 27 May – 4 July 2020

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A Tale of Romance, 2020
(detail), carpet, glazed
ceramics, artificial hair,
fabric, wood, light sphere,
Carpet: 350 × 200 cm,
Sculpture ca. 20 × 130 × 90
cm, Lamp ø 28 cm